The condition of sociology in East-Central Europe

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Summary and some personal responses to problems raised in the discussion

The extensive country reports and the rich discussion during the conference have touched on a stunning variety of problems and challenges facing sociology in post-communist societies of Eastern and Central Europe. The goal of this essay is to underscore some main lines of the debate, systematize the issues, and attempt a tentative summary.

Let's start with a methodological point. The comparative focus taken by the project allows two directions of research. The first, akin to the classical logic of the comparative approach as put forward by John Stuart Mill, is to seek uniformities and similarities in the sea of diversities and differences and then to account for the reasons why such uniformities emerge. The second, opposite in intention, unravels specificity and uniqueness in the sea of seeming homogeneity and then explains why such diversity emerges and persists (Sztompka, 1990).

The main theme of the reports and discussion is the latter: diversity. Only in the myopic perspective of distant outsiders was the so-called "socialist bloc" an undifferentiated entity, a kind of uniformly gray (and sad) area in Europe. We insiders knew better. Bulgaria was different from Czechoslovakia, Romania from Poland, Hungary from the GDR, Albania from Yugoslavia, and all were different from the imperial center, the Soviet Union. These differences have become even more salient and deeper after the collapse of communism and the dismantling of the Soviet empire. Eastern and Central Europe today presents a colorful mosaic of countries different in economic standards, political arrangements, cultural values, lifestyles, mentalities, etc. Why this is so is a fascinating question for sociology. Keeping in mind that, for decades and in some cases for half a century, these countries were subjected to the powerful unifying mold of Soviet-type institutions, organizational arrangements, and indoctrinating pressure imposed by the imperial power, what are the causes of such diversity? And after the collapse of the empire, they have fallen under the new unifying forces: one broader, operating on a world scale and known as globalization, which entered forcefully through the open gates of "open societies"; and another narrower, operating on the regional scale and labeled European integration, which became the common aspiration and political intention of most post-communist countries. In spite of all these influences, they remain different and preserve unique identities. Why?

The focus of our project was the condition of sociologies in post-communist societies and not the condition of societies as such, so this question necessarily remained in the background. The main questions underlying all discussions was: Are the sociologies of Eastern and Central European countries similar or different? How are they faring in the context of the broader phenomenon of European sociology? And finally, how are they being influenced by the progressing internationalization of sociology on a global scale? Summarizing the debate, I will start from the end, with the list of universal problems that we share with sociologists of most other countries of the world; then I will move to regional problems that we share with sociologists of other Eastern and Central European countries; and finally I will close with the list of country-specific problems reported by the participants in our discussion.

1. Universal problems of the discipline

(a) Several discussants raised the problem of interdisciplinary borders as a hindrance to innovative research and a multidimensional explanation of social phenomena. This is of course a concern of sociologists all over the world. The Committee of the Gulbenkian Foundation chaired by Immanuel Wallerstein prepared a famous report "Open the Social Sciences" (Wallerstein, 1996), which argued that the rigid separation between social-scientific disciplines – economics, political

science, sociology – is the unfortunate legacy of academic institutionalization of these fields in the 19th century and has nothing to do with the immanent qualities of social reality.

It is instructive to recall how the problem of interdisciplinary research was resolved in the history of our field. In the classical period of the 19th century, European sociology had a close alliance with history and economics. Just think of Auguste Comte, Karl Marx, Max Weber, and Vilfredo Pareto. Then with the birth of American sociology at the beginning of the 20th century, the links with psychology and particularly social psychology became crucial. Later, particularly in the British tradition, sociology became closely related to social and cultural anthropology. In the meantime, the links with economics and history have become very attenuated. And it is only in the last decade of the 20th century that the birth of two extremely important and lively subdisciplines, historical sociology and economic sociology, signaled the return – in new ways – to the classical tradition.

It would seem natural that under socialism as it existed, which claimed inspiration from the work of Karl Marx, sociology should come close to history and economics. Strangely enough, this was not the case. In those countries where it was officially recognized, sociology was placed somewhere between the brand of philosophy known as Marxism-Leninism or scientific communism, some forms of politological reflection, and fact-oriented demographic statistics. History and economics followed their own courses, far removed from sociology.

Then came the revolution of 1989. Sociology had its glorious days, not only in the sense that sociologists, as ideologists and articulators of grievances, were often on the frontlines of struggle against the old regime. But also because a fascinating range of problems opened to sociological research: the mobilization of mass social movements, new forms of collective behavior, the role of charismatic leaders, and the demise of utopian thinking. The whole perspective on social change was revised: the belief in necessary, irreversible forces of history was replaced by the image of contingent "social becoming" or by collective human agency making history (Sztompka, 1991, 1993a).

The revolution began an arduous task of constructing a completely new social order – democratic, capitalist, culturally open, and pluralistic. Understandably, the process of post-communist transformation (transition, modernization) became a central concern for sociologists. By its very nature, the transformation is a multidimensional process. Ralf Dahrendorf identified its three major levels and the different speeds of changes occurring on each of them in his famous metaphor of "three clocks": the clock of politics, which runs the fastest, allowing major legal or institutional changes almost overnight; the clock of economics, which requires years to shift from the command economy to the market; and the clock of civil society, which runs slowest, since changes in values, mentalities, and "habits of the heart" require decades (Dahrendorf 1990). This multidimensional quality of transformation demanded a multidisciplinary approach. It could not be adequately understood with the tools of just one discipline. Political science, economics, and ethnology (or cultural analysis) joined hands with sociology and a number of studies crossed the traditional disciplinary borders. But in line with Dahrendorf's intuition in the first years of the transformation, the leading role in the alliance was played by political and legal sciences (and their immediate cousins within sociology: political sociology, the sociology of law, etc.), focusing on the process of democratization. Then came the days of economics (and the revival of interest in the sociology of organization, the sociology of labor, economic sociology, etc.), as the focus of research shifted to the processes of marketization and privatization. But after some years it has become obvious that building new institutions is not enough. The barriers, obstacles, and "frictions" (Etzioni, 1991) in the process of transformation have been related to the "human factor" – legacies of "homo sovieticus", trained "civilizational incompetence" (Sztompka, 1993b), deficiencies in motivations and capacities, and the syndrome of pervasive distrust (Sztompka, 1999) – on the level of civil society. To use an apt metaphor: building a new house turned out to be insufficient to create a new home (Brzezinski, 1989). A solid architecture was found inadequate to produce true attachments, loyalties, identities – "feeling at home" in the new structure.

Researchers' attention turned to the social and cultural tissue, where the post-revolutionary trauma (Sztompka, 2000) has left its most acute and lingering mark. And accompanying this, the social costs and unintended consequences of the transformation itself – a radical, deep, and comprehensive change in the whole "life world" of the people – appeared more visibly, with unemployment, considerable enclaves of poverty, a wave of crime, corruption, and moral anomie, the overturning of accustomed hierarchies of prestige, the growing distance between those who succeeded and those who became marginalized, the weaknesses of political leadership, the demoralization of political elites, etc. Here, sociology gained the leading role in the study of transformation, since it is best endowed with the methods and theoretical models to deal with this societal and cultural level of phenomena.

(b) The second universal problem faced in new forms by the sociologists of Eastern and Central Europe is the opposition between empirical research and sociological theory. It seemed that this problem had already been resolved in world sociology by means of the concept of "middle range theory" (Merton, 1968), or explanatory theory, linking research and theory in undivided unity. But, unexpectedly, this problem is now returning in the post-communist societies. Most of the effort in studies of transformation has so far been concentrated on gathering data, particularly by means of survey research, opinion polls, etc. In effect, the diagnosis of the process is very rich. But theoretical reflection has been much more limited. Paradoxically, if it exists at all, it came mostly from outsiders – Western sociologists: Dahrendorf (1990), Offe (1996), Saxonberg (2001), and Kumar (2001), to name just a few. They have proposed generalized models of transformation with some explanatory and predictive power. It is only now, after a decade, that some insiders are venturing similar theoretical images on a high level of generalization, e.g. Pavel Machonin (1997), Jadwiga Staniszkis (1999), Mirosława Marody (2000), and Piotr Sztompka (2000b).

The trouble with narrow empirical focus is not only its relatively limited contribution to sociological knowledge, but also its meager impact on politics and common thinking about society. What politicians as well as common people expect from sociology is not more and more facts and data, but rather a vision, a map of the terrain allowing us to orient ourselves in the chaos of events and phenomena, to tell where we come from, where we are, and where we are going. Politicians and citizens need imagination rather than information, insights rather than facts. This demand can be fulfilled only by valid theory. Instead, when the public image of sociology becomes synonymous with statistics and opinion polls incessantly discussed by the same self-appointed pundits (a new vocation of the "TV sociologists") quoting percentages, drawing cross-tabulations, and offering comments on the level of trivialities well known to every taxi driver in town, then sociology's chances to fulfill its applied and enlightening mission are seriously undermined.

(c) The third universal issue we face in Eastern Central Europe, together with sociologists in other countries, is the impact of globalization. Globalizing tendencies appeared quite early in the domain of science, which is by nature cosmopolitan and ignores borders. In sociology, ideas, concepts, models, and theories characteristically flowed mainly between Europe and America. Sociology, a 19th-century European invention, has developed to a great extent in the US and for much of the 20th century was dominated by American trends and leading scholars (Talcott Parsons, Robert Merton, Paul Lazarsfeld, George Homans). The flow seems to have reversed only at the close of the century, when major European authors – Jürgen Habermas, Niklas Luhmann, Pierre Bourdieu, Michael Foucault, and Anthony Giddens – again started to exert great influence on American sociology and became trendsetters worldwide.

In Eastern and Central Europe in the communist period, ideological and political constraints slowed down or even prevented entirely the full internationalization of sociology. When the barriers were brought down, it often meant wholesale and sometimes uncritical borrowing of Western methods, ideas, and theories. The pressing issue now, after a decade of freedom, is whether we are doomed to remain the poor cousins of Western colleagues – mere recipients, trend

followers, and imitators. Or perhaps we can offer something original and innovative, an authentic contribution to world sociology. The chances for this appear in three directions. First, the post-communist societies present a unique and stimulating "strategic research site" for the study of major, fundamental systemic change, an unprecedented process that Elster, Offe, and Preus wittily label "rebuilding the ship at sea" (Elster et al., 1998). Three aspects of the process seem particularly interesting. Nowhere else – except perhaps in the civil rights movement in the US – has the role of popular contestation, collective behavior, and grass roots mobilization been as salient as in the "revolution of 1989". It provides a perfect laboratory for students of social movements. Then, the purposeful construction and spontaneous emergence of new institutions – the second birth of capitalism and democracy – can be observed *in situ*. And third, the adverse cultural consequences of rapid, wide-ranging and unexpected social change, even if the change, in itself, is beneficial and progressive, – what I call "cultural trauma" – stand out in particularly bold relief.

The second possible contribution appears in the domain of fruitful sociological concepts. Perhaps it is not widely recognized that one of the most fashionable ideas in sociology now, the concept of civil society, was dug up from oblivion when Polish and Czech dissidents started to read the works of Scottish philosophers and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and used some of their forgotten ideas for a critical diagnosis of communist societies, as well as for the main imperatives of their revolutionary program. There are other concepts originating in post-communist experiences that have a chance of entering a canon of sociological wisdom: "self-limiting revolution", "nonpolitical politics", "political capitalism", "conversion of social capital", "civilizational incompetence", "post-communist trauma", etc.

But the ultimate challenge, and the task for which sociologists from former communist societies seem best equipped, is to formulate the historically and empirically grounded theory of social change that would finally depart from utopianism and developmentalism, whether of evolutionist or Hegelian-Marxian provenience, toward an image of contingent history-making by human agents, or what I like to call incessant "social becoming" (Sztompka, 1991), or in other words, permanent production and reproduction of social reality (Giddens, 1985).

2. Regional problems shared among sociologists of post-communist countries

The second group of problems widely discussed among the contributors to the present project relates directly to the experiences of the region. At the forefront is the continuing burden of the past. Societies of East-Central Europe are particularly deeply immersed in history. Thinking of historical influence on the present, we may take various perspectives and adopt various time horizons. For the societies of the region, the obvious period of common fate was the post-World War II domination by the Soviet Union and the imposed communist regime. The importance of this relatively short-range horizon should not preempt the relevance of deeper temporal perspective going back several centuries.

(a) Here it becomes clear that the region has always been underdeveloped compared with leading countries of the West. It has been dominated by agriculture and rural ways of life; industrialization and urbanization were considerably delayed; and the level of education was relatively low. If we accept the idea that sociology was born and developed as a reflective awareness of modernity, then it should come as no surprise that the development of sociology in Eastern Europe has been late and slow. This is a branch of science that simply cannot flourish in pre-modern societies.

Existing socialism was – among other things – a modernizing project. It cannot be denied that its obsession with forced industrialization led to major restructuring of the economy, rapid urbanization, educational advancement of the population, and social benefits for the masses. But

the modernization was significantly incomplete, crippled. It missed two crucial dimensions: democratic politics and free culture. And for sociology, these were crucial. The discipline has always remained constrained in its development, even though the extent of limitations has varied considerably from country to country and from period to period.

(b) But apart from the impact of distant history, more intense debate surrounded the impact of the more recent past: the decades of socialism as it existed. To paraphrase the opening phrase of the "Communist Manifesto", the specter of socialism is still haunting East-Central Europe. How is it manifested?

Let me start with the paradoxical impact of the mental legacies of historical socialism on the conceptual and theoretical content of sociology in post-communist societies. As a reaction to official Marxism-Leninism, sociology has now rejected Marx's ideas and insights completely and entirely. It is seen almost as bad manners to refer to Marx. Nowadays the phrase "Marx is dead" describes the intellectual climate in Eastern Europe better than in the West, where the slogan was first formulated. And the paradox is that many problems that post-communist societies face could be explained precisely by reference to Marx's ideas: e.g. alienation, impoverishment, class divisions, etc. The pendulum has swung too far. And the main reason is insufficient awareness of the fundamental difference between the political and ideological misrepresentation of Marx in so-called "Marxism-Leninism", on the one hand, and the authentic sociological core of Marx's legacy that remains a valid explanatory tool, on the other. It is good to remember that communist authorities were often more vigorous in fighting authentic, theoretical Marxism, which they labeled "revisionism", than in criticizing the "bourgeois theories". This was precisely because no theory unraveled Lenin's or Stalin's ideological abuse of Marxism better than Marx's Marxism. In our present blindness to Marx, we are haunted by the associations with the repressive political system of socialism, which put Marx on its banners quite against the spirit of his liberating, humanistic message.

Another legacy of existing socialism remains on the level of academic institutions. Contrary to the old Western idea of the university, the Soviet model imposed a division between research and teaching Research was located in the institutes and academies of science, the teaching in institutions of higher education. This was particularly true of such a sensitive area as sociology. Even when it was no longer banned, in many countries (the USSR, Bulgaria, Romania, and Czechoslovakia) it emerged first and remained for a long time exclusively within the confines of the research institutes of the national academies of science. Even in countries like Poland, where the strong tradition of research universities, dating back to the 1920s, allowed the restoration of sociology departments as early as the "thaw" of 1956, the double track of sociological research – universities vs. institutes – remains to this day. This is partly responsible for the predominance of the undergraduate teaching at the universities and the slow development of doctoral and post-graduate education. Here we still lag behind leading Western research universities, where the emphasis is clearly on the highest degrees of education, innovative research, and training for research careers.

Governmental policies of socialist regimes exerted a strong influence on the current condition of sociology. Science is a continuous and cumulative enterprise, both in the sense of being a growing pool of ideas and in the sense of having cadres that are continuously reproduced. In some of the countries, rigid policies broke continuation and cumulation. The politicization and ideologization of sociology (if at all recognized under this name) was particularly strong in Russia and the other countries of the USSR, as well as in the frontline country at the border with the West, the GDR. For considerable periods of time, a similar fate befell the countries that were at some point directly occupied and then dominated by the imperial center: Hungary after the revolution of 1956 and Czechoslovakia after the "Prague Spring" of 1968. On the other hand, countries that were able to preserve at least partial sovereignty – like Poland and Yugoslavia – were much more permissive toward academic sociology, and it was able to flourish at their universities and institutes as early as the late 1950s, with strong centers of sociological thought emerging in places

like Warsaw, Kraków, Poznań, Zagreb, Ljubljana, Skopje, and others. As one discussant put it: "There was a revolution in societies, but evolution in sociology." The gap in ideas and personnel was prevented here, unlike in other countries where this gap is only now slowly healing and gradually being overcome.

Another crucial factor was the size and composition of the sociological community, which differed significantly among the countries of the region. The strength and bargaining power of sociologists vis-à-vis political authorities depended on the number of active sociologists. The sociology of a small country, even now, differs fundamentally from the sociology of a big country. The estimated number of sociologists doing research and teaching in Latvia is 20, in Lithuania 100, in neighboring Poland 1,500 (with 17,500 students yearly taking some form of sociological instruction). Another important factor is the typical educational background of currently working sociologists. For example, reports from Estonia and Lithuania indicate that they are recruited from graduates of technical and natural sciences; in Poland, law and history are typical educational experience linked with sociological studies; and in other countries, currently working sociologists often came from the fields of Marxism-Leninism, scientific communism, or political science. These factors influence the level on which the professional standards of sociology have developed; the meaning of the label "sociologist" is quite loose and vague in some countries, whereas in others it indicates very specialized expertise.

Finally, the "hottest" and most contested issue is accounting for and coming to terms with the complicity of sociologists who lived and worked under the old regime, including cases of outright political collaboration. The controversial and sometimes highly emotional public debate that has ensued (see: "Transitions", No. 2/1997 and No. 9/1998) allowed the introduction of certain distinctions. First, most participants agree that outright criminal acts committed by the communist authorities or party apparatchiks should be brought before courts of law. But even here, except for cases of particular personal viciousness or abuses of office, it can be argued that the authorities acted according to the laws of the day. A counter-argument must invoke some parallel to the Nuremberg trials and the notion of the fundamental lawlessness of inhuman laws. Anyway, a number of court trials have been started and continue to the present day. Mercifully, there are practically no sociologists in this first category of collaborators.

The second category contains high-ranking communist politicians, who – with the benefit of hindsight – may be seen as collaborators of the foreign, Soviet regime. There are many cases in which sociologists reached – at least temporarily – high party and political offices (to refer just to the Polish case, these include some famous names: Zygmunt Bauman, Jerzy Wiatr, Włodzimierz Wesołowski, Władysław Markiewicz, Jan Szczepański, and Hieronim Kubiak). Some vicious accusers would forbid any political roles (or even academic roles) for these people in the present democratic system. But again, controversy arises when their past moral responsibility is matched with their present potential usefulness for the country and for science. They happen to be very well trained and skilled professionals of political science as well as of sociology – qualifications that are not in abundance among oppositional activists, who have no earlier experience of ruling and who often come from weakly educated groups. One line of policy leans to pragmatic arguments about using the qualified "cadres" (Brown, 1997: 33). It may even be argued that the role of sociologists/politicians in the past was not entirely negative. For example, at least part of the exceptional story of Polish sociology, which was much more open to the world and free quite early, may perhaps be attributed to the presence of many eminent sociologists at the top echelons of power. They were a sort of "buffer" protecting the sociological community from the direct control and pressure of party apparatchiks who were ignorant of sociology. But of course there are always self-appointed prosecutors (also at our conference) who do not recognize this possibility and who, defining the role of sociologists in power as servility and treason, demand purges.

The proponents of "decommunization" have their weakest case when they apply the idea to the third category of villains: the rank-and-file members of the communist party whose political role or influence on political events was absolutely minimal. Most sociologists fit in this category.

Some of them, a small minority, came to the party because of their leftist ideological convictions. But for most, it was an opportunistic choice at a time when the communist system seemed to be strongly entrenched and destined to persist for centuries. It was a kind of symbolic compromise opening a possibility of fuller participation in occupational and public life, of proceeding with normal careers, and often of contributing considerably to the science of society. Should they now be punished for leftist beliefs or for innocuous opportunism? How can one measure their guilt compared with their professional contributions? This is another contested problem.

It will be obvious by now that the issue is inherently ambivalent and is perceived quite differently by moral fundamentalists than by permissive pragmatists. No wonder it led to completely opposite policies in various post-communist countries. One extreme is the GDR, where the great majority of sociologists were sacked or forcibly retired, and almost all academic positions were filled with Western-trained sociologists, mostly from the German Federal Republic. Another extreme is Poland, where the policy of a "thick, black line" dividing the past from the present was put forward by the first democratic government of Tadeusz Mazowiecki and consistently observed by later governments. This policy of reconciliation and forgiveness was applied to the sociological community. The result is that the former members of the Party Central Committee and even the Politburo, the directors of the Institute of Marxism-Leninisms, ministers in communist governments, and members of the Council of the State (the erstwhile collective presidency), not to mention rank-and-file party members, have retained their academic positions, and are now fully accepted and recognized members of the sociological profession, highly popular with students, democratically elected to academic offices, doing important, innovative research, etc. Isn't this sufficient proof that this policy was right?

3. Specific problems of national sociologies

Let us move now to the third and final category of issues raised by the discussants at the conference. They reflect the specific, idiosyncratic historical or cultural experiences and specific current situations of various countries, which are reflected in the present-day condition of sociology. These factors are mainly responsible for the diversity of sociologies in the region.

(a) Several discussants noticed the national peculiarities of the research agenda. These are rooted, first of all, in different intellectual traditions, with iconic figures whose work is cherished and followed. But of course the research agenda is also responsive to pressing current challenges in social and political life. To give some examples: in Poland, the tradition of humanistic sociology focusing on culture has been particularly strong, due to the work of Bronisław Malinowski, Florian Znaniecki, Stanisław Ossowski, Kazimierz Dobrowolski, and Józef Chałasiński, whose pupils and followers are still around and shape the current trends and research preferences. In the Czech Republic, the intellectual tradition of political sociology shaped initially by Tomáš Masaryk, which was suppressed for a time, has now re-emerged with force. It is also easy to illustrate how most pressing current issues shape sociological agendas. In Balkan countries, but also in Hungary, the sociologies of ethnicity and of religion have become more relevant than in ethnically homogenous societies. On the other hand, in ethnically homogenous Poland, with its huge diaspora in the US, Australia, and other continents, sociologists are devoting considerable attention to the problems of migrations.

(b) A number of discussants emphasized that there are "national styles" of doing sociology. Two polar types were mentioned: one that someone called "the aggregate social psychology", i.e., narrowly empirical, fact-oriented, statistically sophisticated studies of opinions, beliefs, and attitudes, mostly carried out by survey research, and another macro-structural, historical, and cultural orientation in which interpretation and theoretical explanation are much more salient.

(c) Another differentiating factor has to do with international academic connections and currents of influence. These are rooted in the histories of respective countries and are reflected in the life of the sociological community: the directions of personal exchanges, the books translated,

the ideas discussed. It is well known that the language influences one's style of thinking, so countries influenced by Germany may be expected to cultivate different modes of sociology than countries influenced by the Anglo-Americans or those under the spell of French culture. Several discussants mentioned typical international alliances in sociology: Slovenia with Italy and Germany, Estonia with Scandinavian countries, Poland with the US, and Romania with France.

(d) With Max Weber's ghost in the background, some discussants posited that religious differences among the societies in the region were partly responsible for differences in the development of sociology. The examples included: Protestantism in Estonia, Roman Catholicism in Poland and Lithuania, Orthodox Christianity in Bulgaria, mixed Protestant and Catholic influences in Slovakia, and considerable secularization in the Czech Republic.

(e) Finally, an important differentiating factor was found in the strength of traditional pro-Western orientation. It cannot be denied that sociology was a Western invention and has become an important component of Western culture. Hence it can be speculated that in those countries that fell within the orbit of Western influence or aspired to do so, sociology would be stronger than in those influenced by Byzantium or the Ottoman Empire and which looked toward Asia. If the claims of some historians are right (e.g. Davies, 1997) and there is indeed a hidden civilizational and cultural fault line across the European continent that can still be perceived today, then obviously it has to be reflected in the styles, concepts, visions, and theories of sociology.

4. Coda

This closes the long list of universal, regional, and particular traits characterizing the discipline of sociology in post-communist societies of East-Central Europe that I jotted down during three days of discussions at our conference. I believe that a systematic and clear self-awareness of the state of the field, its richness and tremendous diversity, is not an empty scholastic exercise, but may have direct and significant consequences. As the eminent Polish sociologist Stanisław Ossowski once said, sociology is a domain whose fate depends very much on what its practitioners think of themselves.

By providing the opportunity to think about ourselves, for intensive self-reflection and self-appraisal, the organizers and hosts of this conference have done an important service to the East-Central European sociological community.

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